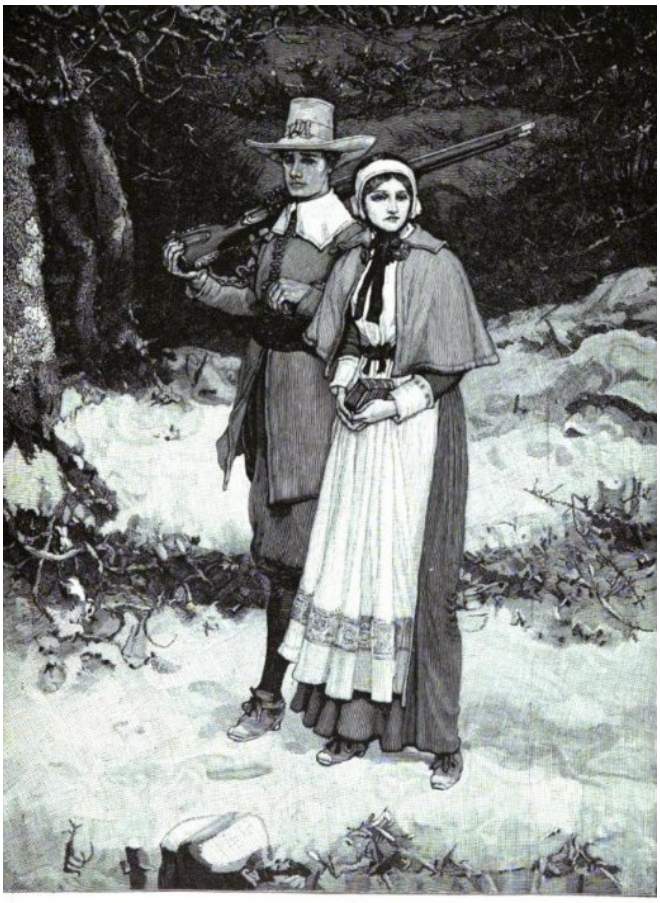
AN EARLY PURITAN WORSHIP SERVICE FOR THANKSGIVING

WITH HISTORICAL COMMENTARY, "FIVE KERNELS OF CORN" REFLECTION, AND PRAYER



Puritans Going to Church.

REV. DR. DOUGLAS K. SHOWALTER

2013, Revised 2025

Rev. Dr. Douglas K. Showalter is a United Church of Christ minister who, during his 39 years of ordained parish ministry, served UCC churches in:

Benson and Orwell, Vermont [1973-1976]
Belfast, Maine [1976-1987]
Falmouth, Massachusetts [1987-2011]
Plymouth, Massachusetts [Interim Minister: 2011-2012].

Doug grew up in New London, Connecticut, and is a graduate of Bowdoin College [B.A.], Yale Divinity School [M. Div.], and Chicago Theological Seminary [D. Min.]. He has long been involved in researching, writing, and teaching the history of American Congregationalism, which was one of the denominational groups that merged in 1957 to form the modern United Church of Christ.

Doug has often used information in this booklet to develop Thanksgiving services of worship in United Church of Christ churches of Congregational heritage in which he has served.

AN EARLY PURITAN WORSHIP SERVICE FOR THANKSGIVING WITH HISTORICAL COMMENTARY, "FIVE KERNELS OF CORN" REFLECTION, AND PRAYER is reissued in 2025 by Rev. Dr. Douglas K. Showalter under this Creative Commons license:
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The image on the cover is found in Joel D. Steele and Esther Baker Steele. *A Brief History of the United States*, United States: American Book Company, 1885, page 54.

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EXPLANATIONS AND PREPARATIONS

I compiled this worship service with historical commentary to help parishioners in Congregational heritage churches I've served better understand the worship of their spiritual ancestors, the Puritans, during the Puritans' first 100 years or so in New England–the 17th century and early 18th century.

I use the term "Puritan" herein to mean both the Separatist Puritans [the "Pilgrims"] in Plymouth Colony and the Non-Separatist Puritans in the other early New England colonies. I have created this compilation drawing from very helpful historical sources such as:

–John Punchard, *A View of Congregationalism, Its Principles and Doctrines* (Boston: Congregational Board of Publication, 1856)

–Horton Davies, *The Worship of the American Puritans, 1629-1730* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1999)

–Peter Benes, *Meetinghouses of Early New England* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012).

One should feel free to adapt this worship service to one's own local church setting. In fact, I found it necessary to weave some more modern elements into this service, such as anthems by our choir, in order to fit the needs of the churches I presented this service in. Also, I did not try to divide the seating in a church by gender, as would have been the case in that early period, though one could attempt to do that. My commentary (in this document) on the early Puritan elements of this service was printed in parishioners' worship bulletins along with the service order.

I hope those who use this service in worship will find it a learning experience and also have some fun with it as they express their thanksgiving to God, both for their spiritual ancestors and for the many blessings God has bestowed upon their lives.

I presented this as a costumed worship service. Attire appropriate to the period might be worn only by the pastor and a tithingman or perhaps also by others who have lead roles in the service. An expanded approach would be to invite interested members of the congregation to also wear period-appropriate attire at this service. And, of course, it would be helpful if information on how such clothing might be made or acquired was provided well in advance of the service.

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ATTIRE

PASTOR – The pastor's attire in that period would usually have been a black Genevan pulpit robe with white neckbands. Also, as shown in the picture of Rev. John Davenport to the right, one could choose to wear a close-fitting black cap. I don't think wigs were generally worn by clergy in this period.

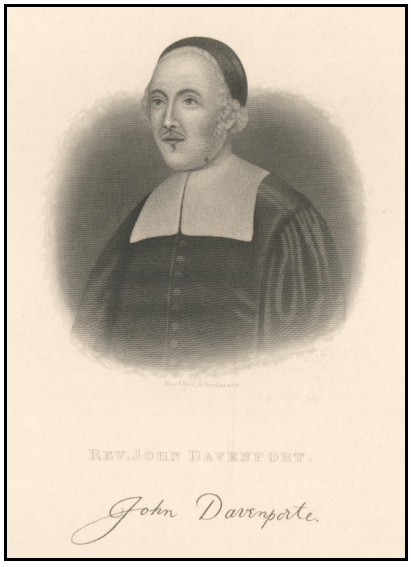

Figure 1. Rev. John Davenport
1597-1669/70
New Haven Colony

LAYPERSONS – To see how laypersons dressed in that early period, one can consult this booklet on that subject: *Dress Like a Pilgrim –A Procurement Guide by Mayflower Guard*, which is available online. It was published in 2021, and The Mayflower Guard is connected with the General Society of Mayflower Descendants.

https://themayflowersociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Dress-Like-a-Pilgrim-Procurement-Guide_revised_9_2021.pdf

SEATING IN THE MEETING HOUSE

PASTOR: The pastor usually led worship from an elevated central pulpit.

RULING ELDERS: If a church had ruling elders, they usually sat below the pulpit, facing the congregation.

DEACONS: Deacons sat below the elders and also faced the congregation.

THE CONGREGATION: The congregation would be divided by gender. Typically, men sat on the left side of the meeting house, facing the pastor. Women sat on the right side. Early on, congregations sat on benches. Later in this period, backs were sometimes added to those benches. At the end of this early period, some meeting houses began to have some individual pews in addition to the bench seating.

PROPERTIES

HOURGLASS: There would be an hourglass visible to the congregation to time the pastor's sermon, to be sure it was long enough–an hour or more.

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Figure 1. Scan by NYPL (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Rev._John_Davenport_(NYPL_b12349142-424106).jpg), Rev. John Davenport (NYPL b12349142-424106), cropped, border added by DS. https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/zero/1.0/legalcode

Figure 2. 1963 Photo – replica of early Pilgrim Fort-Meeting House

Figure 3.
An hourglass

TITHINGMAN'S ROD: In addition to using a rod to remind children to behave, a tithingman might also have used a rod to keep parishioners awake during the pastor's sermon. Such rods might have had a feather on one end and a knob on the other end. It's been said that some early tithingmen used a rod with a fox tail on one end and a sharp thorn on the other end, but for safety reasons I certainly would not recommend the use of the latter in any church service.

➜*LOGISTICS NOTE: Did tithingmen in that early period actually use such rods to keep parishioners awake, or is that just a myth? I suspect some tithingmen might have used such rods in that way. Thus, I have included a tithingman in this worship service. However, I will also note that there have been different views on this question. More information on this matter is included in the Appendix to this document.*

Figure 4. A Tithingman

Figure 2. Wilford Peloquin (1963 photo apparently taken at Plimoth Plantation museum in Plymouth, MA), (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:6308_Pilgrim_Fathers_2_USA_1963_(51188659767).jpg (51188659767), https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/legalcode

Figures 3 and 4. Lucy Fitch Perkins (illustrator) in Margaret B. Pumphrey, *Stories of the Pilgrims* (Chicago, IL: Rand McNally & Co., 1910) hourglass 247, tithingman 246.

DRUM, CONCH SHELL, or TRUMPET: Any of these could be used to call parishioners to worship and lead a procession of the choir, elders, deacons, and pastors into the service.

SCROLL TIED with RIBBON: Could be used to read a Thanksgiving Proclamation from.

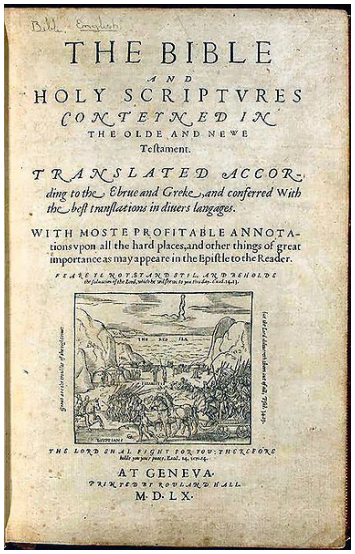
THE BIBLE
AND
HOLY SCRIPTVRES
CONTEYNED IN
THE OLDE AND NEWE
Testament.
TRANSLATED ACCOR-
ding to the Ebrue and Greke, and conferred With
the best translations in diuers langages.
WITH MOSTE PROFITABLE ANNOTA-
tions vpon all the hard places, and other things of great
importance as may appeare in the Epistle to the Reader.
THE LORD SHALL FIGHT FOR YOV: THEREFORE
AT GENEVA.
PRINTED BY ROVLAND HALL.
M. D. LX.

Figure 5. Geneva Bible 1560

PULPIT BIBLE: Could be carried into the service by the pastor or other worship leader.

SCRIPTURE READING from the BIBLE: The Geneva Bible of 1560 A.D. was commonly used by the early Puritans, and I have used it in this worship service. This reading can be printed up ahead of time to be used from the pulpit if that Bible translation is not available in the church.

PRAYER BILLS: A small slip of paper is included in each worship bulletin for parishioners to use for submitting their prayer requests to the pastor near the beginning of the service.

OFFERING BAGS or BOXES on POLES: Some churches have old offering boxes or bags on poles from earlier years that they may wish to use in this service.

FIVE KERNELS of CORN [See Legend of the Five Kernels on pages 19-24 of this document]: If the choice, after the worship service, is to distribute corn kernels to the congregation as a symbol of the extreme hardship the Pilgrims encountered upon coming to the New World, those kernels can be packaged in the following way. Purchase whole corn animal feed, but be sure to tell parishioners not to eat it. Also purchase little plastic bags with press-seal tops, which are sold by pharmacies to carry a small number of pills. Place five kernels of corn in each little bag, then seal it. These would need to be made up in advance of the service, perhaps as a youth group project, and then distributed at the doors of the church as parishioners leave the service.

17th CENTURY TEXT FONT: One can use a special type of text font to produce a worship bulletin for this service that is suggestive of the Puritan time period. Such fonts can be found on the internet and are available for free. For example, the font I'm using for the worship bulletin text in the following worship order is called **JSL Ancient Normal**. It is based on typefaces found in publications in the seventeenth century. I found that font at the following website, which indicates that it can be used for free and even for commercial purposes.

https://www.1001fonts.com/17th-century-fonts.html

Figure 5. English Protestant scholars who fled to Geneva, Switzerland, during the reign of Mary I in England (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Geneva_Bible.jpg), Geneva Bible, marked as public domain, more details on Wikimedia Commons: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Template:PD-old

To use such fonts, one must download them, unzip them, and then install them in the font folder of one's own computer operating system.

In the following worship order, logistical notes for those conducting the worship service *[their text not meant to be printed in the worship bulletin for the congregation]* are presented in a different text font and italicized.

THANKSGIVING SERVICE OF WORSHIP

"I to the hills lift up mine eyes from whence shall come mine aid;
Mine help doth from Jehovah come, which Heav'n and earth hath made."
Psalm 121, The Bay Psalm Book, 1640

The Bay Psalm Book was the first book printed in the British colonies of North America.

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Our service today contains some elements from the relatively simple Sabbath worship services of our spiritual forebears, the early Puritans in New England in the 17th and early 18th centuries, as well as some modern worship elements appropriate for a Thanksgiving service. Following modern scholarly practice, the term "Puritan" here refers to both the Separatist Puritans [the "Pilgrims"] in Plymouth Colony and the Non-Separatist Puritans who lived in the other early New England colonies. The services of those early Puritans are believed to have been much the same throughout New England, though there could well have been some variations from church to church, as each local church was considered to be autonomous with Christ at its head.

The early Puritans mandated that each town would build its own meeting house, specifically for its town members to worship in. Not considered sacred, those buildings were also used for various town activities. Puritan laws also mandated that each town would seek to employ a suitable pastor [Puritan] to preach God's Word to their people.

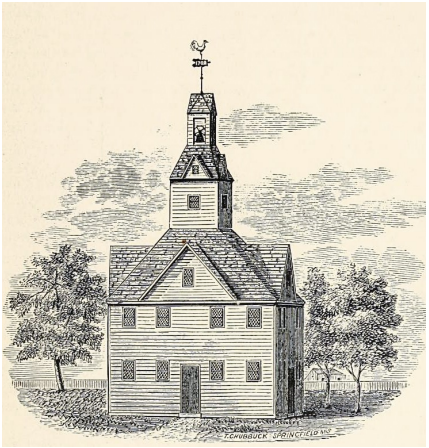

Figure 6. First Meeting House
West Springfield, MA 1702

Typically, the early Puritans had two worship services on the Sabbath, one at about 9 AM and one at 2 PM. In between services, people often stopped at a nearby home in their village for lunch--a practice sometimes called "nooning." Each of those Sabbath services lasted upwards of three hours or even longer. A collection was often taken at the second service.

There were no pews, but only rough seats or benches in New England's earliest meeting houses. Men and women were seated separately on opposite sides of the meeting house. Men often sat on the left side, facing the pastor in the pulpit. It's been said that when those early Puritan women set their hair, they paid particular attention to their "meeting house side"–the side that faced the men's section.

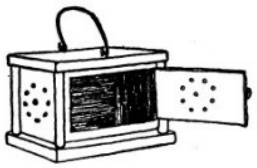

Figure 7. Colonial foot stove

Those early meeting houses had no heat. In the winter, worshipers often brought foot stoves with them to worship services. Sometimes parishioners carried hot stones in blankets, and women carried them in their hand muffs. Pastors wore mittens and preached in overcoats. When infants were baptized in winter--preferably the Sunday after their births--it was sometimes necessary to break the ice in the baptismal bowl first.

The first generation of Puritan churches in New England had five offices of ministry:

PASTOR: proclaimed the Word by exhortation
TEACHER: proclaimed the Word by instruction and by administering Baptism and the Lord's Supper
RULING ELDER(S): helped with church administration, particularly bringing in new members and administering discipline; visited from house to house; also presided at congregation meetings to elect and ordain church officers
DEACONS: collected voluntary offerings at worship to distribute to the poor, to support the church's ministry, and to furnish the Lord's Table with bread and wine
WIDOW: usually an older woman in the church who visited the sick and prayed for the church

In those early years it was expected that each church would have two ministers, the pastor and the teacher. But that soon became impractical. Remembering that Puritan tradition, today's United Church of Christ clergy are ordained and installed in their churches as

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Figure 6. Thomas Chubbuck (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:First_Meetinghouse_of_West_Springfield,_built_1702.png), First Meetinghouse of West Springfield, built 1702, marked as public domain, more details on Wikimedia Commons: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Template:PD-US

Figure 7. Lucy Fitch Perkins (illustrator) in Margaret B. Pumphrey, *Stories of the Pilgrims* (Chicago, IL: Rand McNally & Co., 1910) 243.

"Pastor and Teacher. The Puritans eventually abandoned the office of ruling elder. At that point, deacons, who were ordained for life, took on many of the ruling elder's functions. In the meeting house, the ruling elder and deacons often sat in front of the central pulpit, facing the congregation.

THE PRELUDE

The earliest Puritans in New England did not use organs, strings, or other musical instruments in their worship, as they saw no New Testament authorization for their use. However, they did welcome instrumental music in their homes.

DRUMMING TO WORSHIP

➜*LOGISTICS NOTE: A drummer drums outside the meeting house to call townspeople to worship. Once the hour of worship has come and the congregation is gathered, the drummer might also drum [outside or inside the meeting house] as worship leaders process down an aisle to their seats. Assuming that Bibles were too precious then to be left in empty meeting houses, the pulpit Bible might also be brought in by someone in this procession and placed open on the pulpit.*

The call to attend Sabbath worship was sometimes given on a conch shell or by a drummer or trumpeter.

The Puritan colonies have been called Bible commonwealths because of the desire of their inhabitants to order their colony's life in accordance with biblical teachings. Likewise, early colony worship services strongly emphasized preaching--the proclamation of the Word of God as interpreted from the Bible. Early Puritan meeting houses usually had an open Bible in them during worship. That was an important symbol of their Puritan belief that the Bible should be accessible to and read by all faithful Christians. That openness was in sharp contrast to the practices sometimes found in the Old World of chaining Bibles up or keeping them away from laypersons out of fear they would misinterpret them.

MOMENT OF GREETING AND CONCERNS

➜*LOGISTICS NOTE: At this point, the congregation may be informed of unusual aspects of the service they are about to experience, including, for example, the request that they fill out prayer bills and the request that, if they are able to do so, they follow the Puritan practice of standing during prayers.*

RECEIVING OF PRAYER BILLS

In Puritan worship, parishioners sometimes presented "bills" to their pastor before he stepped into the pulpit. Those bills were small slips of paper that contained the names of people and/or events the bill writer wished to have remembered in a prayer of the service. Every worship bulletin for this service contains a slip of paper. Please have your bills ready to be collected by our ushers so they can present them to our pastor.

➔*LOGISTICS NOTE: Take a moment before the service begins to have prayer bills filled out by the congregation, collected by the ushers, and given to the pastor. In my experience, many parishioners turned those slips of paper in folded. I had just enough time during the first hymn to hurriedly unfold all those slips of paper and organize them so I could read them during the first prayer of the service. It occurs to me that one could simplify that process some if one did any or all of the following:*

–Explicitly ask the congregation not to fold them

–Get help from others in organizing those prayer bills during the first hymn

–Read some of the prayer bills during the service's first prayer and the remainder during the prayer immediately following the sermon.

THE CALL TO WORSHIP *Psalm 100* Ruling Elder or Deacon

Other than singing hymns and saying "Amen" to the prayers offered by the pastor, early Puritan worship services usually did not provide much opportunity for congregations to participate in them orally. Services were primarily led by the clergy. The ruling elder and deacons sometimes assisted. However, when the afternoon Sabbath service was over, there often was an open session in which congregation members could ask for their pastor's advice, discuss his sermon, and/or "prophecy" [express their own interpretation of biblical passages and faith views to the congregation].

A HYMN OF ADORATION *Come, Ye Thankful People, Come*

In the fall of 1621, following their brutal first winter in the New World, in which only 52 of the 102 Mayflower passengers survived, the Pilgrims in Plymouth set aside three days to celebrate the success of their autumn harvest. Wampanoags were guests at that celebration, which included feasting and game playing. That celebration has long been honored as the "First Thanksgiving" in America. Though there is documentation that Spanish explorers and other English colonists had religious observances of thanksgiving in America years before the Pilgrims'

Mayflower vessel arrived, it is the Pilgrims' three-day celebration in Plymouth that has been both well known and long considered the historic origin of America's annual observance of Thanksgiving.

Figure 8. The First Thanksgiving at Plymouth
(as imagined by artist Jennie A. Brownscombe, 1914)

The Pilgrims' three-day celebration in 1621 was similar to the Harvest Home festivals they had known back in England. Although those English festivals were largely secular in nature, there is good reason to believe that the Pilgrims were deeply thankful for the goodness of God, which brought them that harvest after they had endured so many hardships. As Pilgrim Edward Winslow wrote of that harvest, ". . . and God be praised, we had a good increase of Indian corn, and our barley indifferent good. . ." Ironically, the Native American corn that the Pilgrims had taken when they first landed on Cape Cod, then later paid for, was the corn that sustained them.

A PRAYER

The Puritans rejected prayer books and set forms of worship, as they considered them human inventions that were idolatrous and thus forbidden by the second of Moses' Ten Commandments. They preferred extemporaneous prayers that relied on the aid of the Holy Spirit. They viewed the Lord's Prayer as a model for constructing their own prayers but did not include it as a set prayer in their church worship until 1699 and later. The first prayer in their worship service often lasted a quarter of an hour. Their custom was to stand during the prayers in their worship services. While standing in prayer, some may have lifted their eyes to heaven, as Jesus did. We invite those who are able to stand to please do so during this prayer.

AN ANTHEM

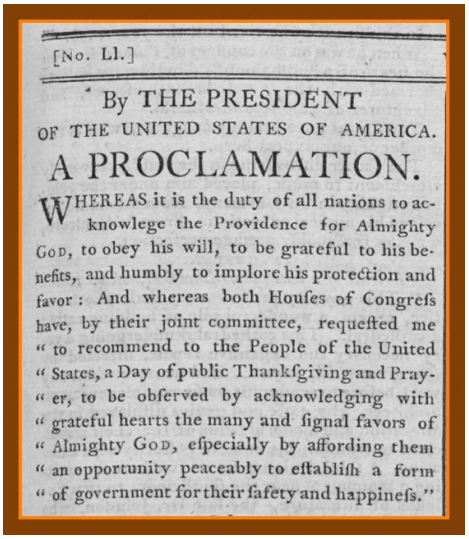
Figure 8. Jennie Augusta Brownscombe creator QS:P170,Q9011444 (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Thanksgiving-Brownscombe.jpg),Thanksgiving-Brownscombe, marked as public domain, more details on Wikimedia Commons: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Template:PD-old

The early Puritans did not have choirs sing in their worship services. They felt that choirs took away from a congregation's opportunity to sing God's praises from their hearts. However, after 1720 some Puritan churches began to develop singing schools so parishioners could better learn hymn tunes and be trained to sing in harmony. Beginning about 1770 or so, such trained singers were allowed to sit together in meeting houses and sing as choirs in worship services. Today, in contrast to early Puritan practice, we will continue our modern practice of having our choir and their singing be a very valued part of our worship. It wasn't until 1770 that the Congregational church in Providence, Rhode Island, became the first Congregational church in New England to have an organ.

A THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATION — *Ruling Elder or Deacon*

➜*LOGISTICS NOTE: A Thanksgiving proclamation by a U.S. President may be read, either the one for the present year, if available, or a historic one. That proclamation might be written on a scroll of paper that is tied with a ribbon and brought up to the pulpit at this point in the service, where the scroll is unrolled and the proclamation is read to the congregation.*

In addition to Sabbath worship services, early New England Puritans also set apart special days for religious observances. The Puritans were strong believers in God's providential acts. When terrible events took place that seemed to be God's judgment against them for sins they had committed, they set aside days of fasting in order to seek God's forgiveness. When beneficial events took place that seemed to reflect God's goodness and mercy toward them, they set apart days of Thanksgiving to express their gratitude to God.



[No. LI.]

By THE PRESIDENT
OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.

A PROCLAMATION.

WHEREAS it is the duty of all nations to acknowlege the Providence for Almighty GOD, to obey his will, to be grateful to his benefits, and humbly to implore his protection and favor: And whereas both Houſes of Congreſs have, by their joint committee, requeſted me "to recommend to the People of the United "States, a Day of public Thankſgiving and Pray-"er, to be obſerved by acknowledging with "grateful hearts the many and ſignal favors of "Almighty GOD, eſpecially by affording them "an opportunity peaceably to eſtabliſh a form "of government for their ſafety and happineſs."

Figure 9. Beginning of Washington's Thanksgiving Proclamation October 3, 1789

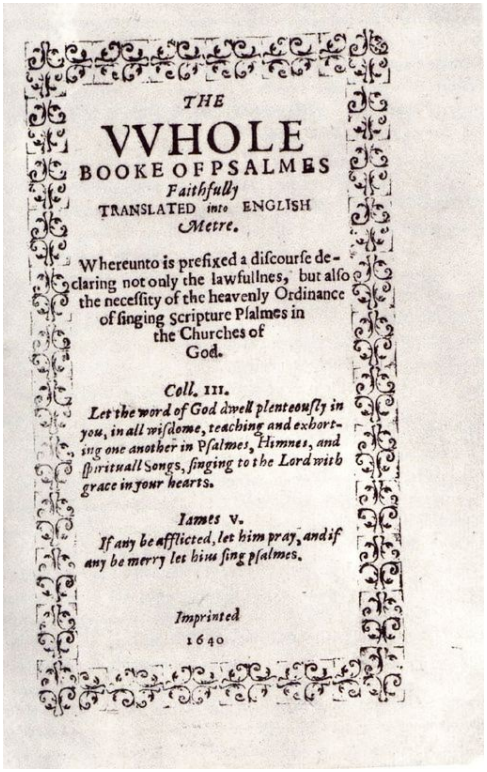
In a similar spirit of thankfulness for God's blessings and the fall harvest, the Continental Congress proclaimed our country's first national days of Thanksgiving from 1777 to 1784. And in 1789, it was George Washington who issued the first Presidential Thanksgiving Proclamation, a practice that is now followed by every U.S. president.

THE SINGING OF A HYMN

➜*LOGISTICS NOTE: The following Psalm hymn from the Puritans' The Bay Psalm Book from 1640 can be sung to the familiar tune of Old Hundredth. From the front of the church, the precentor lines out each line of this hymn, then invites the congregation to sing each line a cappella. The*

simple tune line of Old Hundredth could be printed in the worship bulletin above the words of the hymn.

In the earliest years, Plymouth Colony congregations sang hymns that were based on the Psalms in the Old Testament, as they felt that only biblical verses were worthy enough to be sung in worship. For such singing they initially used the Ainsworth Psalter, but then about 1692 or later they began using The Bay Psalm Book, which was first published in the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1640. No music was printed in The Bay Psalm Book until its 9th edition was published in 1698.


THE
VVHOLE
BOOKE OF PSALMES
Faithfully
TRANSLATED into ENGLISH
Metre.

Whereunto is prefixed a diſcourſe declaring not only the lawfullnes, but alſo the neceſſity of the heavenly Ordinance of ſinging Scripture Pſalmes in the Churches of God.

Coll. III.

Let the word of God dwell plenteouſly in you, in all wiſdome, teaching and exhorting one another in Pſalmes, Himnes, and ſpirituall Songs, ſinging to the Lord with grace in your hearts.

Iames V.

If any be afflicted, let him pray, and if any be merry let him ſing pſalmes.

Imprinted
1640

Figure 10. The Bay Psalm Book, 1640

In 1681 the "lining out" of Psalms was begun in Plymouth and was commonly practiced in New England's Puritan churches by the mid-18th century. A precentor or clerk would line out a psalm by reading/singing each of its lines out loud before the congregation sang the line. This was done to help any members of the congregation who were illiterate. It also was useful when there were not enough hymnals for worshippers. But lining out often produced some terrible singing and eventually was abandoned, though not without much controversy in the churches. Our precentor will line out this psalm hymn for our congregation today. Please sing each line after the precentor without accompaniment.

Psalm XXIII

The Lord to mee a shepherd is / want therefore shall not I
He in the folds of tender grasse, / Doth cause me downe to lie
To waters calme hee gently leads, / restore my soule doth hee:

Hee doth in paths of righteousness: / for his name's sake leade me.
Yea though in valley of deaths shade / I walk, none ill I'll feare:
Because thou art with mee, thy rod, / and staffe my comfort are.
For mee a table thou hast spread, / in presence of my foes:
Thou dost anoynt my head with oyle, / my cup it overflowes,
Goodness and mercy surely shall, / all my dayes follow mee:
And in the Lord's house I shall dwell, / so long as dayes shall bee.

THE SCRIPTURE LESSON — Pastor, Ruling Elder, or Deacon

EXPOSITION OF THE SCRIPTURE LESSON

Many 17th-century Puritans referred to the public reading of Scripture from the pulpit without comment as "dumb" readings. They associated such readings and the recitation of the Lord's Prayer with formalism and chose not to include such readings and recitations in their public worship services. However, the practice of including Scripture readings in worship began to appear more commonly in Puritan services in the 18th century. Following the latter practice, our Scripture reading today is from the Geneva Bible of 1560 A.D. That Bible translation was often favored by New England Puritans. It was originally brought to these shores by the Pilgrims on the Mayflower. The Geneva Bible was influenced by Swiss Protestant reformer John Calvin in 16th-century Geneva, Switzerland. This translation had extensive marginal notes that were strongly Protestant in orientation and also critical of monarchy. To avoid the charge of being a "dumb" reading of scripture, our reading today will be followed immediately by a brief explanation of the passage and its context.

THE SERMON — Pastor

➜*LOGISTICS NOTE: Before the sermon begins, the tithingman sets the hourglass. If the hourglass runs out during the sermon, he resets it. At the conclusion of the sermon, the tithingman checks the hourglass. If the sermon is less than one hour in length, the tithingman informs the pastor and the congregation that the sermon was not long enough. During the sermon the tithingman also watches the congregation to be sure no one is dozing. If they are, the tithingman uses his rod, either the feather end or, in more severe cases, the knobbed end, to awaken them.*

Figure 9. *Gazette of the United-States*. (Philadelphia, PA), Oct. 7 1789, 1. Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.: https://www.loc.gov/item/sn83030483/1789-10-07/ed-1/, Public domain.

Figure 10. Unknown printer (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bay1640.jpg), Bay1640, marked as public domain, more details on Wikimedia Commons: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Template:PD-old

Preaching was considered the climax of early Puritan worship services. It was the time when the pastor exercised his primary role as the expositor of the oracles of God. Adults and children listened carefully to sermons as "the wisdom of God plainly delivered," as one modern scholar put it. And they often memorized the key points of the sermons they heard in order to recount them in their homes that night. Some even brought ink and paper to church to record them. Puritan sermons sought to persuade the heart, but they also were significant experiences for the intellect.

Puritan worshipers believed that sermons provided nourishment for their souls. Therefore, they often felt malnourished if their pastor's sermon did not last at least an hour. An hourglass was often used to be sure that the congregation was not deprived. During the preacher's sermon, our tithingman will attend to the hourglass and also survey the congregation to be sure that everyone remains awake and attentive.

➜LOGISTICS NOTE TO PASTORS

I'll mention the following idea to pastors, in case any might wish to experiment with it. Over the course of three successive Thanksgiving Sundays in one church, I did the following for the sermon in this costumed service. Each year I told the story of a portion of the Pilgrims' experience and reflected on the significance of that experience for us modern Christians of Congregational heritage. However, in telling those stories, I recast them in our modern day with my church's parishioners and myself as those Pilgrims. Those sermons were very well received. Those three sermons covered the following:

–The arrest of the Pilgrims in England and their exile in Holland
–The Pilgrims' voyage on the Mayflower and arrival in the New World.
–The Pilgrims' first year in the New World and first Thanksgiving

Fortunately, the strong faith of the Pilgrims guided them and gave them strength, even when they faced considerable hardships in each of the above episodes in their lives. To get an idea of those sermons, see my brief description of my first one, which follows here.

I began that first sermon by setting the scene of our congregation deciding to abandon our beautiful church on the Village Green in our town of Falmouth in order to worship in secret in the barn of one of our parishioners [whose name I mentioned] at the edge of town. Why? Because the town's police are watching us to make sure our worship and my dress as a minister conducting worship conform to the laws of the state. But then, despite our attempts at secrecy, spies all over town tell the police what we were doing. Now, I'll note what I then said in that sermon, mentioning the names of our own parishioners:

"The town's [town name] police chief [person's name], and his officers begin arresting our church leaders and throwing them into the [name] County Jail.

Our church's moderator [person's name] is arrested in the middle of the night at his home. His wife [first name] stands at their door, pleading with the officers, but to no avail. Our head deacon [person's name] is apprehended while attending a history class at [name] Community College.

Head trustee [person's name] is arrested at a police roadblock while heading up to [named town] to visit relatives. Stewardship committee member [person's name] is arrested at the town [name] school where he teaches. His students are shocked as [first name] is dragged out of his science classroom in handcuffs. Deacons [two persons named] and Music Committee chairman [person's name] are put in the stocks on the Village Green, where townspeople can pass by and repudiate their civil disobedience and defiant religious behavior.

Figure 11. In the stocks

It's only a matter of time before everyone in our church family is tracked down and thrown into jail for a while. Our church people are in a panic. What can we do?"

The sermon continues in that way, telling the story of the hardships our church people faced as they, and I as their minister, were forced to flee our native land and live in Holland so we could practice our faith freely. In naming church parishioners, I took some care to describe them as they are. For example, our head deacon at that time really was attending a Community College. I found that such details added a sense of reality to the story and hence appreciation of the sacrifices the early 17th-century Pilgrims must have made for their faith.

A PRAYER

Following their sermons, pastors often offered a long prayer that could last as long as an hour. Today, following the Puritan custom, we invite those who are able to stand to please do so during this prayer.

THE OFFERING Deacon

➜*LOGISTICS NOTE: A deacon rises and calls for the offering, saying, "Brethren of the congregation, now there is time left for contributions; wherefore as God hath prospered you, so*

Figure 11. Winsor, Justin (ed.), Clarence F. Jewett. The Memorial History of Boston: including Suffolk County, Massachusetts. 1630-1880. Vol. 1 The Early and Colonial Periods, (Boston, Massachusetts: James R. Osgood and Company, 1880) 506.

freely offer." Ushers then come forward to pick up the offering plates and then take the offering. Some churches may have old offering boxes or bags on poles from past years, which they may wish to use in this service.

In the early years of American Puritanism, a freewill collection was sometimes received in connection with the second worship service on the Sabbath. Once this collection was announced by a deacon, the entire congregation came forward from their seats to place their monetary contributions in a wooden box in the seat beside a deacon or at a deacon's feet if their contribution was another type of item. Congregation members then filed back to their seats.

In the mid-17th century, laws began to be enacted in the Puritan colonies to ensure that Puritan ministries in New England towns were adequately supported. Over time, in communities across Massachusetts, but not in Boston, the support of those ministries came through town taxation, and such collections were no longer taken in connection with worship services. However, in the late 19th century, largely due to changes in the law, Massachusetts Congregational churches began supporting themselves through free will collections again, and the receiving of such collections became part of Congregational worship services. In this service we will collect our offering in the way most familiar to us while our congregation remains seated.

AN ANTHEM

THE DOXOLOGY

➔*LOGISTICS NOTE: At this point the offering is taken as it is normally. The offering boxes and bags are brought forward as the Doxology is sung. The pastor gives a prayer. Then, the ushers place the offering plates in the front pews and walk back down the aisle to the vestibule. If the doxology you are using is set to the Old Hundredth, then you might wish to used the following traditional doxology.*

Praise God from whom all blessings flow; Praise him, all creatures here below;
Praise him above, ye heavenly host; Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen.

That doxology was published in 1695 in England as the closing stanza to three different hymns written by Anglican Bishop Thomas Ken. However, that stanza soon came to be sung by itself as a doxology, set to the Old Hundredth tune. That tune appeared in the Genevan Psalter of 1551. When Puritan refugees left Geneva and returned to England after the death of Queen Mary, they brought that Psalter and that Old Hundredth tune with them to use in their worship.

A PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING

THE SINGING OF A HYMN Now Thank We All Our God

THE BENEDICTION

➜*LOGISTICS NOTE: The pastor and worship leaders go to exit doors to greet those leaving the service. As people leave, they are each given a little packet with five kernels of corn in each to place beside their Thanksgiving table setting.*

As a matter of respect, it was customary in many Puritan churches for the pastor to be the last person to enter the service and the first one to leave.

As you leave this service, we invite you to receive five kernels of corn to place beside your Thanksgiving dinner plate as an important symbol of our church's spiritual heritage and the significance of this national holiday. At your dinner this coming Thursday, we also invite you to use the Thanksgiving prayer, which is included in this worship bulletin.

POSTLUDE

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Drummer
Deacon(s):
Tithingman:
Precentor:
Organist:
Pastor and Teacher:
Historical Commentary: Rev. Dr. Doug Showalter

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

A good source of information on the Pilgrims' "First Thanksgiving" in the fall of 1621 and the development of America's annual observance of Thanksgiving is found on the Plimoth Patuxet Museum website at: https://plimoth.org/.

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LEGEND OF THE FIVE KERNELS OF CORN

Figure 12. Plymouth Bay in Midwinter (1620-1621 AD)

Like all free churches of "the Congregational Way," we are spiritual descendants of those courageous Pilgrims who came to these shores in 1620 seeking freedom to practice their own faith and who, despite incredible hardships, celebrated what has been called the "First Thanksgiving," the historic origin of America's annual Thanksgiving holiday.

Only 52 of the 102 Mayflower passengers survived the Pilgrims' first winter in new England. Yet, the next spring not a single Pilgrim returned to England. Despite their hardships, those Pilgrims continued to hang on, trusting God's love and mercy. And they were not disappointed! For in time, their settlement did prosper.

In 1820 in Plymouth, Massachusetts, at the Bicentennial celebration of the Pilgrims' landing in America, Daniel Webster spoke, after which a great banquet was held. Before eating that great meal, many were stirred to discover FIVE KERNELS OF CORN beside each of their dinner plates. Those kernels were silent but precious reminders of those courageous people of faith and the faithful, loving God who had led them through and beyond that first dreadful winter of their suffering in this New World.

Figure 13. Five Kernels at Thanksgiving

And so down through the years, it has been the THANKSGIVING TRADITION in some New England homes to set out FIVE KERNELS OF CORN at each diner's plate, in remembrance and in prayerful thanksgiving for God's continuing faithfulness to us, even in hard times.

Note: The above FIVE KERNEL custom has sometimes been connected to the belief that in 1623 (even after the Pilgrims' devastating winter in 1620-21), the Pilgrims' food supply was reduced to the point where they had only 5 kernels of corn to eat per person per day. However, it

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Figure 12. Pratt-Chadwick, Mara L. *America's Story for America's Children, Vol. III. The Early Colonies* (Boston: D. C. Hewath & Co., 1903), 114.

Figure 13. Doug Showalter, public domain.

is now believed that very likely the Pilgrims did not experience that degree of hardship in 1623. Rather, the longstanding FIVE KERNEL custom initiated by Daniel Webster in 1820 is now seen as legendary in nature and a symbol of the initial hardship and suffering the Pilgrims faithfully endured in 1620-21 when they first came to this New World.

A good resource on the above is the November 28, 2013, web page by Heather Wilkinson Rojo, entitled "The Five Kernels of Corn Myth at Thanksgiving," at https://nutfieldgenealogy.blogspot.com/2013/11/the-five-kernels-of-corn-myth-at.html

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A THANKSGIVING PRAYER

Eternal God, who cares for all your people, we thank you for your many blessings in our lives. We thank you for....[Children and family members around the table are given the opportunity to mention things they are thankful for].

We also thank you that even in difficult times, you are always with us, seeking the very best for us, through your great love. Bless those who are gathered around our table today, and bless this food we are about to receive for our nourishment.

Guide us, that we, like the Pilgrims of old, may be brave and trusting in you as we live out our faith day by day. And help us always to treat others with caring and kindness, as we would have others treat us. With praise and a deep spirit of thanksgiving in our hearts, we lift up this prayer to you on this special day. Amen.

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APPENDIX

What Was The Role Of Tithingmen In Early New England Meeting Houses?

It has been customary in modern reenactments of 17th-century Puritan worship services for there to be a tithingman who uses a rod with a feather/knob on opposite ends of it to awaken parishioners who have fallen asleep during their minister's long sermon. Supposedly, the knob was for those who were more difficult to awaken.

QUESTION: Did tithingmen actually do that during early New England worship services to keep parishioners awake? Or is that just a myth?

In his 2012 book, *Meetinghouses of Early New England*, Peter Benes asserts that the idea

of the above practice is based on "pure fancy," that it reflects not actual practice but just an event in a fictitious diary created by James Robinson Newhall, who was a judge in Lynn, MA, and died in 1893.

Excerpts from Newhall's fictitious diary were in a chapter in Newhall's book entitled *Li: or, Jewels of the Third Plantation*, which was first published in 1862.

Newhall claimed that the diary was kept by one Obadiah Turner, a native of England who settled in the Third Plantation–"parent of the renowned City of Lynn, or "Lin"– created in 1629. This diary had entries from 1630 to 1681. The second edition of Newhall's book *Jewels*, published in 1880, had the following entry in it from Turner's diary, which, I believe, Benes was referring to in his own book. [pages 18-19]

> *1646. Iune ye 3: Allen Bridges hath bin chose to wake y° sleepers in meeting. And being mch proude of his place, must needs have a fox taile fixed to ye end of a long staff wherewith he may brush ye faces of them y' will have napps in time of discourse; likewise a sharpe thorne wherewith he may prick such as be most sounde. On ye laste Lord his day, as hee strutted about ye meeting house, hee did spy Mr Tomlins sleeping with much comforte, hjs head kept steadie by being in ye corner, and hjs hand grasping ye rail. And soe spying, Allen did quicklie thrust his staff behind Dame Ballard and give hjm a grievous prick vpon y° hand. Wherevppon Mr Tomlins did spring vpp mch above y° flooro and with terrible force strike wth hjs hand against ye wall, and also, to ye great wonder of all, prophainlie exclaim, in a loude voice, cuss y° woodehuck; he dreaming, as it seemed, y' a woodchuck had seized and bit his hand. But on comeing to know where hee was and y° great scandall hee had comitted, he seemed mch abashed, but did not speake. And I think hee will not soone againe go to sleepe in meeting. Ye women may sometimes sleepe and none know it, by reason of their enormous bonnets. Mr Whiting doth pleasant-lie say y' from ye pulpitt hee doth seem to be preaching to stacks of straw wth men sitting here and there among them.* [pages 70-71]

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I will include here some other references to such tithingmen in early New England, which I have found in other early New England works. You can decide for yourself what the truth of this matter likely is. Are they real history or myth?

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Alice Morse Earl, in her 1891 book, *The Sabbath in Puritan New England*, devoted a whole chapter to such tithingmen. She entitled that chapter "The Tithingman and the Sleepers." In that chapter she quoted [in updated language] the above account from Newhall/Turner, assuming it was authentic history. She also noted a number of other instances in which tithingmen awakened sleepers during sermons in early New England. Here's how Earl began that

chapter:

> *"The most grotesque, the most extraordinary, the most highly colored figure in the dull New England church-life was the tithingman. This fairly burlesque creature impresses me always with a sense of unreality, of incongruity, of strange happening, like a jesting clown in a procession of monks, like a strain of low comedy in the sober religious drama of early New England Puritan life; so out of place, so unreal is this fussy, pompous, restless tithingman, with his fantastic wand of office fringed with dangling foxtails,—creaking, bustling, strutting, peering around the quiet meeting-house, prodding and rapping the restless boys, waking the drowsy sleepers; for they slept in country churches in the seventeenth century, notwithstanding dread of fierce correction, just as they nod and doze and softly puff, unawakened and unrebuked, in village churches throughout New England in the nineteenth century.*
>
> *This absurd and distorted type of the English church beadle, this colonial sleep banisher, was equipped with a long staff, heavily knobbed at one end, with which he severely and pitilessly rapped the heads of the too sleepy men, and the too wide-awake boys. From the other end of this wand of office depended a long fox-tail, or a hare's-foot, which he softly thrust in the faces of the sleeping Priscillas, Charitys, and Hopestills, and which gently brushed and tickled them into reverent but startled wakefulness."* [pages 66-67]

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The following definition is from *Dictionary of Americanisms, A Glossary of Words and Phrases Usually Regarded As Peculiar to the United States* by John Russell Bartlett, 1848:

> *"TITHING-MAN. In New England, a parish officer appointed to preserve order at public worship, and enforce the proper observance of the Sabbath.—Worcester."* [page 358]

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From "The New England Meeting-House" in the February 1891 edition of *The Atlantic Monthly* comes the following text:

> *"In Stratford, in 1660, a tithingman was 'appointed to watch over the youths or disorderly carriage, and see that they behave themselves comelie, and use such raps and blows as in his discretion meet.'*
>
> *I like to think of those rows of soberfaced Puritan boys seated on the narrow, steep pulpit stairs; clad in kneebreeches and homespun flapped coats, and with round cropped heads, miniature likenesses in dress and countenance (if not in deportment) of their grave, stern, God-fearing fathers. Though they were of the sober Puritan blood, they were boys, and they wriggled and twisted, and scraped their feet noisily on the sanded floor; and I know*

full well that the square-toed shoes of one in whom 'original sin' waxed powerful thrust many a sly dig in the ribs and back of the luckless soul who chanced to sit in front of and below him on the pulpit stairs. Many a dried kernel of Indian corn was surreptitiously snapped at the head of an unwary neighbor, and many a sly word was whispered and many a furtive but audible 'snicker' elicited when the dread tithingman was 'having an eye-out' and administering 'discreet raps and blows' elsewhere. . ." [pages 201-202]

"Few towns were content to have one tithingman and one staff, but ordered that there should be a guardian set over the boys in every corner of the meeting-house. In Hanover it was ordered 'That there be some sticks set up in various places in the meeting house, and fit persons by them and to use them.' I doubt not that the sticks were well used, and Hanover boys were well rapped in meeting. The Norwalk people come down through history shining with a halo of gentle clemency, for their tithingman was ordered to bear a short small stick only, and he was 'Desired to use it with clemency.'" [page 202]

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THE END